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ABSTRACT

In one county in Maryland, less than one-third of the eligible citizens chose to participate in primary elections held in 1990. The response mirrored the rest of the nation. The participation of U.S. citizens in the policital process depends on the development of a social environment that stresses the transformation of all political subjects into participating members. Ways in which this "civic culture" may be fostered are discussed, including the role of higher education institutions in this endeavor. (DB)

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Is A Civic Culture Possible in the 1990's? A Response to "Law, Obedience, and Civil Disobedience"

Challenges and Choices for the Law
in the 21st Century

A Community Colloquium
sponsored by the
Maryland Humanities Council

Hagerstown, Maryland
October 11, 1990

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Introduction

The first year of the new decade bears a striking resemblance to Dickens' assessment of the era of the French Revolution. "It is the best of times; it is the worst of times." We are experiencing unprecedented technological change. Breakthroughs in medical and engineering sciences promise an improved quality of life. At the same time, social unrest runs rampant. We face a substance abuse crisis of grave proportions. Our government came perilously close to ceasing to function. The White House, a symbol of our national unity, is picketed daily by citizens disturbed over government policy on civil and individual rights.

Our colloquium could not take place at a better time. In less than a month there will be an election that will allow American citizens to voice their concerns within the context of civic responsibility. Will they? The primary election held a month ago does not bode well. In Washington County less than one-third of the eligible citizens chose to participate. The response mirrored the rest of the nation. So what? Some social commentators point to the data as an example of the essence of the American system--the right of choice. I do not agree.

Our keynoter suggests correctly that the continuum of civil obedience-disobedience is based on the pragmatism of personal values and informed choice. However, nonparticipation demonstrates no awareness of values. Further, it too often reflects lack of awareness and absence of choice. Professor Robert Woyach of Ohio State University observes that a chief failure of our political system during

the past half century has been its inability to encourage our citizens to participate in the development of a shared understanding of the common good.[1] Since the early sixties, political scientists have been endeavoring to develop a social environment which stresses the transformation of all political subjects into participating citizens. The process has been described as the development of a civic culture. The conceptual framework of my response is that without the development of a civic culture there is no rational basis for either civil obedience or disobedience.

The Social Context for Decision Making

One hundred forty-one years ago, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "I think that we should be [human] first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right."[2] His position, upon initial examination, is easy to agree with. When analyzed, difficulties arise. What is "the right"? Who will determine its composition? How will the needs and expectations of those who disagree be safeguarded? The answers to these questions are the elements inherent in the development of a civic culture.

Current research in organizational sociology provides some useful insight into the process of developing a social context within which a civic culture may develop. An organization is a neutral entity; it cannot have values or promote ethics. The individuals who comprise the organization are the ones who determine its ethical and legal norms. M. Cash Mathews reiterates the classic research of March and Simon. "Propositions about organizations are statements regarding human behavior." In her opinion civic culture "is based on the attitudes,

beliefs, and values of the members of the organizations that comprise it."[3] What is the current state of values orientation in social organizations? James Waters, professor of management at York University, Ontario, Canada, provides an interesting perspective. He differentiates between personal integrity and social integrity. The former is behavior that is consistent with individual principles of goodness or rightness. The latter is "not simply consistency between [individual] actions and principles but [further] adherence to generally accepted principles or standards of goodness or rightness in [all] human conduct."[4] What is the current status of these concepts in our society?

In 1986-87 Waters and Bird conducted a national study to ascertain the "moral dimension of organizational culture." Their findings are germane. Many individuals report a sense of isolation in organizations. "A key source of moral stress for individual[s] . . . is the general absence of institutionalized structures which accord a public character to moral concerns."[5] They discovered that discussions about ethical issues took place among individuals outside the organizational context but were close to being "nontopics" among groups within the organization. Their conclusion is important. "Because individuals do not feel able to discuss moral questions with peers and superiors, they often experience the stress of being morally on their own."[6] Is there a remedy for the absence of a values orientation in our society's organizational infrastructure?

Mathews suggests that the organizational groups to which one belongs are the most important source of reinforcement of individual

behavior, often taking on an almost family-like relationship. She proposes, further, that only those changes in behavior having their origins in human interaction have social relevance.[7] Therefore, rebuilding a values orientation must begin at the group level within organizations. Her suggestions include a two-pronged, long-term intervention approach. First, structural change within the organization needs to be initiated. Second, reinforcement at the group level needs to be undertaken which will promote "pro-social" behavior. The approach insures both establishment and maintenance of an ethical and "law-abiding" organizational culture. Further, structure modification provides a lasting rather than transitory intervention.[8] Unless the support remains, the return to individual isolation, stress, and eventual alienation is likely. The task is both extensive and significant. How can it be undertaken?

The Agent of Organizational Renewal

In his assessment of the process of strengthening citizenship, Woyach is convinced that the most accurate perceptions of the public good will emerge from an environment in which discussion is encouraged and many points of view are recognized as legitimate and listened to carefully.[9] Is there a social institution that is uniquely suited to promoting open dialogue which is values based? I propose that the nation's higher education community is the logical one.

In the spring of 1989, Ohio Wesleyan University sponsored a symposium designed to investigate the processes needed to enhance the role of higher education in fostering the emergence of a civic culture. The principles that emerged are germane to our discussion. First, the

institution "articulates moral order." There is no intent to generate or create morals, rather the expectation is to mediate, reconcile, and seek consensus. Second, the institution strives in a conceptual way to integrate Waters' ideas of a personal and social integrity. Attention is given to a "life-long reflection on the relations between theory and practice in the world." The result is reinforcement of personal perspective and its integration into a larger social context. Finally, the higher education community acts as "an intellectual proving ground" for the models of moral development and societal reform that will make a civic culture possible.[10] Participants in the symposium were eloquent in their insight.

Benjamin Barber, Walt Whitman Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, presented an individual perspective. Students of all ages "require the knowledge and skills . . . by which they might flourish as free citizens in communities of discourse and communities of action."[11] The result of his perspective will be twofold. First, isolation and moral stress will be reduced. Second, the ethic of personal values as the basis for informed choice will be reinforced.

John W. Cooper, senior research fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., took a pragmatic position. If the higher education institution promotes "civic and civil discussion [leading to] a genuinely pluralistic society" then "the compartmentalization of social reality" will be counteracted.[12] The benefit for the civic culture will be the reduction in the number of decisions made in the absence of social integrity which result in harm being done to many citizens.

Finally, Suzanne Morse, director of programs for the Kettering Foundation, provides a useful synthesizing description of the institution. Colleges and universities must become "civic laboratories" with two purposes. They will attack the social problems found in a diverse society. Also, they will produce a group of Americans who are thinking about problem solving in a civic way.[13] From these elements can a civic culture emerge.

Conclusion: Regular Folks Caught in the Maelstrom of Change

The topic civil obedience and disobedience is interesting. However, I will conclude by presenting a different focus. Our nation is embroiled in a maelstrom of social change. If we are to manage it so that the core values which gestated the American experiment in egalitarianism over 200 years ago will continue, action must be taken. The question is not civil obedience or disobedience, but rather, can we engender a renaissance of civic involvement? Will our decisions, therefore, be values driven and based on informed choice? I am optimistic that the nation's higher education institution has the ability to create a civic culture in which the answers will be yes! I will close with two questions. If not now--when? and If not us--who?

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7. Mathews. op.cit., p. 41.

8. ibid., p. 138.

9. Woyach. op.cit., p. 16.

10. Manfred Stanley. "The American University As A Civic Institution." The Civil Review. Vol. 2, No. 2 (spring 1989), pp. 6-7.

11. Benjamin Barber. "Response I to Stanley" in ibid., p. 10.

12. John Cooper. "Response III to Stanley" in ibid., p. 13.

13. Suzanne Morse. "Response IV to Stanley" in ibid., p. 14.